

Bioethics and Art

François Ansermet

The Art of Making Children. The New World of Assisted Reproductive Technology

London: Karnac Books, 2017

Prune Nourry

Serendipity

Paris: Actes-Sud, 2018

This book review is dedicated to two influential books of François Ansermet, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in Geneva and the only non-French member of the prestigious French Ethics Committee in Paris. The first one is *The Art of Making Children. The New World of Assisted Reproductive Technology* (London: Karnac Books, 2017); and the second, *Serendipity* (Paris: Actes-Sud, 2018), in which Ansermet contributes with his texts to the artistic work of Prune Nourry.

The books are two separate works, but they are conceptually intertwined. In fact, the English version of *The Art of Making Children* takes distance from the original French title *La fabrication des enfants* (Odile Jacob, 2015), introducing the term “art”, which brings her closer to the gesture of creation.

Prune Nourry is also related to bioethics in two different ways: the art, and her own suffering. She was already a consecrated artist when at the age of 31, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was in the middle of one of her most extraordinary work, the *Terracotta Daughters*, devoted to condemning, through art, the use of sex selection technologies in China. Upon knowing about her illness, she decided to

make the Book and film a documentary to testify to her inner battle. In her own words, the initiative was inspired by the film director Darren Aronofsky, when he told her: “as an artist, anything that happens to you, you can turn it into creativity”.

The term *serendipity*, which entitles both the Book and the Film, refers to a creative event that emerges from the contingency. Not by chance, but from that singular moment in which the subject came across the unpredictable. In Ansermet’s own words: “Prune Nourry’s art works through serendipity. It reveals something that was already there although we didn’t know it. Serendipity is the process of discovering what we didn’t know in the most unexpected way.”¹

And Prune Nourry launched herself into that challenge. Five years before her illness, she held a series of gatherings entitled *Procreative Dinner*, dedicated to reflecting on the meaning of fertility within limits imposed by the contemporary commercial logic. These procreative banquets were performances that brought art, gastronomy, and science together. For this event, Prune Nourry teamed up with a chef and a scientist to design food dishes that follow the different stages of assisted procreation. Thus, *in vitro* fertilization was made into a cocktail or sex selection a main dish, inviting participants to reflect on the concept of “designer babies”. These banquets took place in Paris and Geneva, in the presence of Jacques Testart, biologist, Francois Ansermet, psychoanalyst, and Arianne Giacobino, geneticist.

In line with another bioethical artistic performance such as *Sperm Bar* (2011), Nourry produces a new twist. The possibility of gametes manipulation in an extracorporeal way, as occurs in the preservation of fertility by freezing oocytes or ovarian tissue, are procedures that women who wish to become pregnant go through before receiving chemotherapy. So Nourry’s aesthetic research is also a way to perform her own process before the breast cancer treatment.

Nourry does not spare the awkward questions: “Did I know it would come? Did I create the illness?” Or as she said in an open forum dedicated to the process of resilience through art:

To give you an example, one of my first sculptures was a breast, then during a performance called *The procreative dinner* between art, science, and gastronomy while following all the steps of Assisted Procreation from the *Sperm Bar* to *The Delivery of the Baby*, which is a reflection on eugenics, on designer babies, the new technologies today to create your own type of a baby. At the end of the dinner, I served my breasts, even I molded my nipple at the time and served it in almond paste without knowing that one day I would still have the mold, but I won’t have the nipple anymore.²

1 Ansermet, F. “The act of the artist”, Introduction to *Serendipity*, p. 9.

2 The art of resilience: <http://eticaycine.com.ar/TheArtOfResiliencePruneNourry.html>

In short, as Ansermet himself states, “on the one hand, we have procreation supported by biotechnology, and on the other, we have a work of art. Two different poles that interweave around the questions raised by the new ways of making a baby in today’s world. Prune Nourry entwines two universes: art and science.”³ And indeed, her work unites the creative event, in the artist’s style, with human procreation, which is also a gesture of creation.

We do this following the Platonic spirit, proposing to find in Nourry’s performances something of the comic and the absurd that distinguished the Athenian philosopher. Plato was also, in his way, a jester who branded his own writings as funny jokes, “while playing hide and seek with the almost silent absence of this presence”.⁴ The issue, as can be seen, is rich in resonances. That the dishes served at this banquet’s table are Nourry’s own anthropomorphic sculptures, gives the scene a disturbing character. Designer babies served in dishes alert us of the real nucleus that always threatens to be affected by the procreative maelstrom/voracity.

Artistic performance resonates with clinical performance — in the sense of the spectacularity that some procedures acquire in the procreative process. Performance art navigates between improvisation and the surprise of the spontaneous while resorting to formulas that, from reiteration, provide a floor to improvisation⁵. An artist’s performance is a way to deal with that which is real, as it is a journey of psychoanalysis. For different ways, aesthetic creation and the direction of a cure offer this possibility.

The selection of children from procreation following precise criteria is part of Prune Nourry’s critical work; she raises the question of child selection from an installation-performance that enacted a *procreative dinner*. In her own way, the work reveals the effect on the bonds between procreation and prediction, focusing precisely on the choice of both: the gametes and zygotes to obtain a child tailored to the parent’s wishes and expectations.

“The procreative dinner introduces a displacement of the sexual scene on to a scene around the consuming of food, implying possible cannibalism. First, one chooses the sperm one is to sample, among that of bankers, doctors, artists, architects, lawyers; then the egg, its specific flavor. The embryos that have been made are then presented to the guests: it is up to each of them to once again make a choice regarding which

3 Ansermet, F. *ibid.*, p. 11.

4 See Robert Graves. *The Greek Myths*. Penguin Books, United Kingdom, 1955, and the issue on the Plato’s Symposium, published by María Angélica Fierro, *Aesthetika*, June 2017.

5 Viera Cherro, M. (2020) Capítulo 11. El anonimato de la provisión de gametos en Uruguay: un consenso implícito que se evidencia y reafirma en la *performance* clínica. En *Desafíos actuales en la clínica de la reproducción humana asistida*. Comp. Lima & Rossi. NEU editorial.

one they will keep, on the basis of certain characteristics or handicaps. Then comes the meal, the baby is consumed scalpel in hand, as well as the placenta, the umbilical cord, and even the maternal breast in the guise of a very realistic flan. All the guests surround the table, which is covered in x-rays and eye each other with worry and intrigue. The most unconscious dimensions at play in the engendering of a child are being triggered by the impact of the set-up, right down to the question of infanticide that is introduced by a film about the selection of children on the basis of gender—a problem that is still prevalent in parts of the world where the proportion of boys to girls is significantly higher. To each their own choice perhaps, but also to each their own discomfort in confronting the consequences of a choice that goes beyond them. To choose based on predictive criteria involves carrying responsibility for the procreation, a domain in which up until now, no one had been responsible, at least not in terms of their intentions. (...) Beyond any mastery, chance can re-emerge in many ways; already within the dimension specific to biology itself, through genetic instability and epigenetic processes.”⁶

If, as Ansermet says, all procreation is a creation, and reciprocally, every creation implies a creative conception, to bury ourselves into the art is then an analytical gesture: it opens us to the mystery of the wise questions that have not yet been answered.

Juan Jorge Michel Fariña, Natacha Salomé Lima

6 François Ansermet: “The Art of Making Children. The New World of Assisted Reproductive Technology”. London: Karnac Books, 2017, p. 130.